

I Can't Find the Words

For moments when you know something is happening but language is not available.

Sometimes words disappear when the nervous system is overloaded. You may know that something is wrong, uncomfortable or too much but be unable to explain it. You might lose speech, go blank, repeat the same phrase, need much longer to answer or find that every question makes language harder to reach.

You do not have to explain yourself immediately

Communication can be a word, a gesture, typing, pointing, choosing an option, drawing, silence or asking for time.

Right now I am...

The closest word might be...

If words are not possible, put anything here

Letters, marks, repeated words, symbols, colours, a sentence fragment or simply 'I don't know'.

Which Words Come Closest?

Choose, copy, circle on paper or ignore the list and use your own.

Maybe it feels like...

ANGRY FRIGHTENED CONFUSED TRAPPED PRESSURED EXHAUSTED BLANK UNCOMFORTABLE HURT
OVERWHELMED RESTLESS SAD IRRITATED NUMB UNSAFE STUCK TOO MUCH I DON'T KNOW

What is definitely NOT the right word?

Sometimes ruling words out is easier than finding the right one.

If the feeling had a colour, shape, sound or texture...

What Is My Body Saying?

You may be able to describe sensation even when emotion words are unavailable.

Notice without forcing meaning: tight jaw, pressure, racing heart, nausea, heat, cold, shaking, buzzing, pain, heavy limbs, restlessness, tears, numbness, needing to move, needing to hide, wanting distance, covering ears, closing eyes, becoming very still or losing speech.

Where I feel it

What my body is doing

What my body seems to want

What Happened Before the Words Went?

Language can become harder when too much is happening at once.

People and questions

Was someone asking repeatedly, expecting a quick answer, interrupting, challenging, correcting or asking you to explain feelings?

Environment and senses

Noise, light, touch, crowds, movement, smell, heat, pain or competing information may be using up processing capacity.

Demand, change or emotion

A sudden change, decision, conflict, uncertainty, rejection, time pressure, fear or strong emotion may have arrived first.

Please Stop Asking Me to Explain

Support can reduce the demand on language rather than adding to it.

When speech or language is difficult, more questions can create more pressure. Think about what would make communication easier: silence, extra processing time, yes/no choices, written options, typing, pointing, one question at a time, a familiar person, no eye contact requirement or simply being allowed to respond later.

Please STOP...

It would HELP if you...

A way I CAN communicate right now...

No Words Is Still Communication

You are allowed to need time before meaning becomes language.

A message from Maggie

Not being able to find the words does not mean there is nothing to say. Sometimes your nervous system is using so much capacity to manage sensation, emotion, uncertainty or social demand that language becomes temporarily harder to access. You do not have to produce an explanation on somebody else's timetable. A pause, a gesture, typing, pointing to this page or saying 'I can't answer yet' can all communicate something important. Give the words time to return. And if they return differently from how another person expected, they are still your words.

What I want people to remember about me

A sentence or signal I can use

Examples: 'I need more time.' 'Please stop asking questions.' 'I can type but I can't talk right now.'

Further reading

- National Autistic Society — communication and sensory differences.
- Price, D. (2022). Unmasking Autism.
- Kapp, S. K. (ed.) (2020). Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement.
- Milton, D. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'.

Sudden or unexplained new loss of speech can have medical causes and may require urgent assessment.